

The Sovereign Will.

A plan is in this life of mine
Despite its sin and wrong;
Beyond my will a hand divine
Hath led my steps along.
I've traveled oft a thorny way
Which I could not refuse,
But mercies followed, day by day,
More than my heart could choose.

Man's pride in youth hath oft proposed
Which way his course should tend,
To find a sovereign will disposed
The journey and the end.

Man's way, I find, is not in man
To order and control,
There lies above his partial plan
A larger, grander whole.

Learn thou, my soul, without debate,
God's voice and hand to heed;
In faith to labor and to wait,
Content to let him lead.

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An Old Christmas Star.

TEXT: Behold there came wise men from the East to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews, for we have seen his star in the East, and are come to worship him.—Matt. ii., 1-2.

The hour prefigured in visions, and foretold by seers, has come at last. The temple of Janus being now shut as a sign that all the world lay at peace, and the nations being gathered under the wings of mighty Rome, a decree went forth for a census to be taken of the whole empire. The sceptre had now departed from Judah, and Herod, the hated Edomite, sits upon the tributary throne of Judah. A general expectation of some great event holds the world in suspense. Rome, the imperial; Athens, the learned; Jerusalem, the haughty, all are passed by, while the Redeemer bears upon earth from the little village of Bethlehem, whither a simple Galilean carpenter and his betrothed bride have journeyed for their enrollment among the descendants of David.

We read in an Eastern story of a magic tent so small that it could be folded in a nutshell, yet so expansive that when set up on the field it easily covered the armies of the king. The story ceases to be a marvel of fancy beside the more-miraculous reality of our Savior's birth and kingdom. The rough trough of a manger holds the King whose infant hand hold heaven and earth in its little hollow.

The words, "In Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod the King," are weighty with meaning. Herod was a monster of cruelty and wickedness, and for more than thirty years the Jews had groaned under his tyranny. A Jewish embassy to Rome after his death told Augustus that "the survivors during his lifetime were even more miserable than the sufferers." "O for the Messiah!" must have been the silent cry of many longing hearts. To many waiting souls the Savior seemed to have come just at the right moment. The predictions of Daniel had led many, such as old Simon and Anna "to understand the number of years." And then he came at the right place, too, it was David's town. What a grand train of circumstances led to the selection of this humble birth place. It was decreed that the infant Messiah should be born a houseless wanderer, and his manger cradle be for all time the symbol that he who was rich for our sakes became poor. At Nazareth he would have been born, under a humble roof indeed, but still with all preparation and comfort for mother and child. It was the Roman census that not only took Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem at the critical time, but filled the travellers' "khan" and sent them out into the stable, or what answered for one, so that Heber could write:

"Cold on his cradle the dewdrops are shining;
Low lies his head with the beasts of the stall."

It is deeply significant that the first public recognition of Jesus should have come from a band of Gentiles. The Magi were the priests and scholars of the East. They were learned in all science and philosophy, but especially learned in astronomy. Their religious belief is said to have been derived from Abraham, which may help to account for their remarkable knowledge of the Messiah. It is certain that they must have long been looking toward Judea as the cradle of an expected King. This expectation, no doubt, caused them to scan the heavens with increasing desire and hope. In the alphabet of the stars they sought to spell out the deep designs of God. Our knowledge of the wise men is very limited. Superstition and ignorance have shrouded their history in unnecessary mystery and speculation. In the great cathedral at Cologne you may see, in a gorgeous shrine, three skulls, you are assured, of the "three kings," Melchior, Casper, Balthazar—mediaeval German names, by the way—who were

the "wise men of the East." And, no doubt, many an American tourist has stayed at the hotel of the Three Kings at Basle on the Rhine, named after the same persons. It is not by this kind of speculation that we should honor their memory, but rather let us imitate them in their zeal. We will not now indulge in speculative investigation, but from this circumstance glean some practical lessons.

Notice: First, that these "wise men" (astrologers) are drawn to Christ by a star. God always appeals to us in the manner that we can best understand, and that we can be the most easily influenced. The wants, occupations, and capacities of men are always taken into consideration by omniscient love. This circumstance under consideration is not unique in the workings of Providence. The Lord did not draw the fishermen of Galilee to Him by a star, but by a full net of fishes. The Bethlehem shepherds were drawn by the song of the angels. He made the mothers of Judea his friends by blessing their children. The sick were drawn to him by a practical and substantial sympathy. Whether raising to life a dead son, laying a tender hand upon a wasting sore, or hanging a new star in the sky. Christ tends to enter the heart, by that door which stands widest open. Then let us look around, and we will find Christ appealing to us in our immediate vicinity, whether it be in the field, in the kitchen, or the store, or the sick-bed, or even at the door of the tomb. Look up, kind friend! Had the Magi not kept looking up, they would never have beheld the star. Yes: look up! You will find the stars of God's mercy and grace around you on every hand, and though you see them but dimly twinkling down upon you through the misty atmosphere of doubt and trouble, they, nevertheless, if silently, yet unmistakably invite you to Christ.

We notice also that those who are nearest to Christ are not always the first to find him. That these Gentile astronomers over a thousand miles distant, should be led to Christ by the glimmering of a star, while the multitude around the village caravansary were unconscious and indifferent to the great event is just what we experience to-day. The multitude in Bethlehem, like so many now, heard and wondered, but we may conclude, did no more. The facts were striking, to be sure, but the careless listeners soon forgot. The hurry and bustle of the succeeding day, the business which had brought them to town, their vexations and cares absorbed their thoughts, and they remembered not that strange tale of angelic visitants proclaiming the wonderful birth of the Messiah-King. Were there then, no religious people? you ask. Of course there were; we are introduced to them in the Gospel, making broad their phylacteries, praying at the street-corners, despising the poor and the sinful, "Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites." But the list of those who were ready to welcome Jesus were few—very few, Simeon and Anna, Joseph and Mary, Elizabeth and Zacharias, the humble shepherds and the Gentile astrologers.

We see the old story reproduced around us. Thousands assemble at the Lord's house, and even mingle in the devotional exercises, but alas! how few welcome Christ into the heart. Many hover around the sanctuary week after week, month after month, year after year, and still do not go in and lay their offerings at the feet of Christ, while we see others coming from the far-off plains and valleys of sin and crime, following the faint glimmerings of the star of hope, and bringing their broken hearts to him and laying their lives at his service. That you live and move in religious circles is not enough. Come nearer! Bring your souls, your lives and your hearts to him.

Again, many believed that a child was born, no doubt they even admired the beauty of the babe, and they may have considered the circumstances of his birth as startling and singular, and more than that, some in their superstition may have looked upon it as mysterious, and that the little one may become some great man. There were a few, probably, that may have looked upon the Infant Jesus as a prophet. But those who received him as God manifested in the flesh were very few. Is there not a strange tendency in the same direction to-day? A few years ago, England was startled by the secession from the Anglican church of an eminent and popular minister in London; not on account of ecclesiastical differences such as lead men to change their church relation, but avowedly because he had ceased to believe in miracles, and particularly in the Incarnation, which the church he left plainly and emphatically taught. But why refer to England, have we not in America also a great deal of loose teaching on this point, or at least that the truth is often conveniently avoided? Have we not apologists who are anxious to conciliate the objectors to this doctrine? Awake Christians! and stand by the doctrines of the Bible. The Word of God does not divide its great text, "God so loved the world

that he gave his only beloved Son." Remember upon this central fact of history rests the whole structure of our Christian faith. Remove the foundation and the building falls to the ground. No doubt you may build up another system in its place and call it Christianity; but it will not be the Christianity of Paul and John, of Augustine and Chrysostom, of Luther and Wesley. Let us hold on to the Gospel revelation that not only a child was born at Bethlehem, who became the founder of the Christian religion; but that the child though the offspring of an earthly mother, had no earthly father, and was in very deed the Son of God in human flesh.

The tendency to let the essential Godhead of Jesus Christ fall into the background of our belief is much encouraged by a circumstance, for which, in itself, we ought to be very thankful. I mean the flood of light thrown by recent literature upon his early life and its surroundings. We have very attractive pictures of the Babe of Bethlehem, of the Boy of Nazareth, of the Man of Sorrows. His perfect character and the reality of his human sympathy, are described and illustrated in books of great eloquence and power. But do not let us be led astray from the Godhead of Christ. The one message which the divine, eternal Word speaks in the Incarnation is Redemption, not love simply, but redeeming love. The hints in the proclamation which prepared the shepherds to accept the Babe of Bethlehem were the obvious references to the prophecies of a divine Savior: God to be manifested in the flesh as *Immanuel*, "God with us," to save his people from their sins.

We might briefly call attention to the faith displayed by the wise men. What was the secret of the success of these men? Surely it was not their extensive knowledge of Christ, neither was it the favorable opportunities they enjoyed. If any seekers after Christ were ever embarrassed by ignorance, and straitened by peculiar difficulties, they were "the wise men from the East." What courage, perseverance and zeal we see in these Persian sages, as we follow them in their weary journey from the extreme East. To mark their progress one might suppose they had received secret intelligence of the nativity, with a chart of the route and a minute description of the holy child. But no! They had only their faith for a guide, for remember the star did not go before them to Jerusalem. This then was the secret of their zeal and consequent success—faith. They were willing to trust in the little light they had, and even that was only the momentary glimmer of a star.

It is a question sometimes discussed among us, How will the poor heathen of Africa be saved? The same question with regard to Eastern Gentiles and star-worshippers may have occupied the pious circles of Jerusalem on the very day of Christ's birth. And while in their temple they praised God for a knowledge of the law, thanking him they were not as the poor Persians, those despised star-gazers, following the little light they had, were coming through the eastern gate of the city to startle Jerusalem with the news that the King had been born. We do not know that gentle Africa will ever rise in judgement against Christian America; yet I would not wonder that it were true that many a swarthy heathen to-day, never told of Jesus and the meaning of remission, knows more of nearness to God in his way, than some instructed Christian who has line upon line and precept upon precept. Christians, follow the Persian sages in this, go on in the light you have, and trust God for more. As you near the end of the journey, as with them it will be with you, the more constant will the light be, and it will be before you, and lead you into the immediate presence of your Jesus.

Now we have seen how the first friends of Christ paid him homage, let us as a closing remark see how his first enemies treated him. When Herod caused the cruel butchery of innocent babes, it seemed a peculiar dawn of peace on earth and good will toward men. It seems strange to us that the infant reign of Christ should be established in the warm blood of children and the tears of broken-hearted mothers. This cruelty was only in keeping with the general character of the bloody tyrant. Only a short time before he had burned alive two eloquent Jewish teachers and forty of their scholars, for boldly attempting to pull down his golden eagle from the temple gate. His nearest kindred were not safe, for his wife Mariamne and their sons, Alexander, Aristobulus, and Antipater fell victims to his suspicions, the last just before his own death; and he fully deserved what the emperor Augustus should have said of him: "It is better to be Herod's swine than to be his child." Therefore to arouse the hatred of such a demon meant bloodshed. This was a strange beginning for the Reign of Peace. Gospel and blood have mingled from the first, and they have ever moved hand in hand. Suffering and Christ often come together into our homes. Suffering often enters